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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001311

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KWMN](#) [KU](#) [WOMEN](#) [POLITICAL](#) [RIGHTS](#)

SUBJECT: KUWAITI VOTING RIGHTS: MOCK PLEBISCITE CANCELED  
AND IRKED ACTIVISTS SUE ISLAMIST MP

REF: A. KUWAIT 1200

[B](#). KUWAIT 1091

[C](#). KUWAIT 1016

[D](#). KUWAIT 991

Classified By: DCM Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Pro-Government MP Jamal Hussein Al-Omar told the Ambassador that the GOK still lacks enough votes to pass legislation granting women's suffrage, but the Government continued to insist the voting rights bill would pass. Sources claim a cabinet reshuffle is in the works to secure enough 'yes' votes. At the same time, in a private conversation with the Ambassador, a senior advisor to the Prime Minister concurred that the U.S. low-profile on the issue is the best method for avoiding increased Islamist claims that foreign pressure is behind the move to grant women the vote. Meanwhile, organizers suddenly canceled a mock plebiscite designed to gauge Kuwaiti women's support for voting rights. MP Waleed Al-Tabtabaie raised activists' ire, and drew a defamation lawsuit, when he allegedly claimed they were promoting a society of "bisexuals and bastards." End summary.

Dissenting Voice from Parliament  
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[1](#)2. (C) MP Jamal Hussein Al-Omar, a pro-Government liberal who weeks ago predicted the bill would pass (ref B), shared his now pessimistic view with the Ambassador at his diwanya that the Government lacks the votes necessary to grant women political rights. Furthermore, he was concerned about the leadership's ability to garner the numbers. He was particularly critical of Justice Minister Ahmad Bager, a known voting rights opponent, and questioned why the GOK tolerated this dissent and did not reorganize the Cabinet. According to Al-Omar, the continuing influence of the Islamists and internal disputes within the Al-Sabah family inhibit immediate changes.

[1](#)3. (C) In speaking one-on-one with Khaled Al-Fulaij, Oil Advisor to the Prime Minister, the Ambassador stressed that the U.S. strategy of remaining out of the limelight on voting rights should not be interpreted as lack of support for the initiative. Al-Fulaij said that no one, including the PM, doubted U.S. support for women's suffrage and concurred with the analysis of most proponents that more vocal U.S. backing would be counterproductive. (Note: Islamists and Government opponents continue to claim foreign influence is behind the latest push to grant voting rights, which they claim is inappropriately-timed. End note.)

Mock Plebiscite Abruptly Canceled  
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[1](#)4. (U) Despite widespread media coverage about an anticipated March 28 mock plebiscite designed to measure Kuwaiti women's support for voting rights (ref A), the Kuwait Journalist Association (KJA) abruptly canceled the event. An English-language daily reported that female activists supported the decision to cancel since asking women to "vote" on the issue was inappropriate as female political participation is a constitutional right regardless of society's viewpoint.

[1](#)5. (U) A KJA board member, however, told emboffs that one of the organizers took it upon himself to tout the event in the media without first consulting with the board. (Comment: The report strains credibility given the large amount of pre-event publicity and abrupt cancellation. End comment.) Since the mock vote participants would have been self-selected, the poll would not represent a random sample. According to the contact, board members feared a high turnout of voting rights opponents could skew the results, thus damaging their cause. The contact assured us that no outside pressures influenced the KJA's decision to cancel the plebiscite.

Government on the Stump  
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[1](#)6. (U) Voting rights proponents, including MPs Mohammed Al-Sager and Yousef Al-Zalzala, spun the public debate in a

new direction by re-labeling the discussion as a struggle for human rights rather than for women's rights. Since the constitution states that all Kuwaitis are equal, there should be no differences between men and women regarding voting, the two declared at a March 23 seminar at the American University of Kuwait.

17. (U) During a March 26 interview with a UAE-based newspaper, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Shaykh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah reiterated GOK support for women's voting rights. He stressed that Kuwaiti women's suffrage has been a long-time wish of Amir Shaykh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and encouraged parliamentarians to vote in favor. He recognized the professional contributions of Kuwaiti women including their role to help liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1990.

18. (U) In response to a press report that the GOK intends to name a new information minister as soon as possible to help bolster the number of National Assembly votes in favor of voting rights. Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah announced the appointment of a new Information Minister will come "when the time is right" and not necessarily when merely politically expedient. Media speculation centers around Dr. Ali Al-Tarrah, a liberal and dean at Kuwait University, as the favored candidate. Shaykh Sabah further emphasized that women's voting rights would pass even without the nomination of a new minister. The GOK maintains that no cabinet reshuffle is in the offing. Rumors continue, however, that the Ministries of Finance; Information; and Social Affairs and Labor are likely targets for change.

Women's Rights Activists Take on Al-Tabtabaie  
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19. (U) The Women's Cultural and Social Society has filed a defamation lawsuit against Salafi MP Waleed Al-Tabtabaie for allegedly accusing women's rights activists of promoting a "society of bisexuals and bastards." He also purportedly asserted that rights' activists are stirring public opinion against opponents. The Society is one of the leading organizations advocating the extension of voting rights to women. In response, Al-Tabtabaie charged that his words had been misinterpreted and taken out of context.

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